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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM PINR PREF EAID RS
SUBJECT: COMPARATIVE CALM IN CHECHNYA AS KADYROV
CONSOLIDATES CONTROL

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Alice G. Wells; reason 1.4
(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A September 22-24 visit to Chechnya, the first by an Embassy political officer in almost two years, showed that life -- in Groznyy, at least -- has achieved a surface normalcy and that people were more interested in solving their own "day-to-day" problems than worrying about politics. A Moscow-based human rights organization noted, however, that while the number of people killed or abducted in Chechnya so far this year is about the same as last year, there was a worrying spike in abductions during August. Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have consolidated his control over the former breakaway republic after the September 24 murder in Moscow of former State Duma member Ruslan Yamadayev by unknown assailants, although his death may again stir up the rivalry between the two competing clans. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) As part of a September 21-27 trip to the North Caucasus to visit humanitarian assistance projects funded by the Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, poloff spent three days in Chechnya. A veneer of normalcy covers Groznyy. Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov has almost completed rebuilding along the city's main thoroughfare, which was totally destroyed as a result of the two Chechen wars. Kadyrov announced October 5 that the name of the street has been changed from Victory Avenue to Vladimir Putin Avenue. In contrast to neighboring Ingushetiya, things in Chechnya appeared calm and there was not a noticeably heavy police or other law enforcement presence on the streets downtown, where private vehicles predominated and people walked freely along the sidewalks. Identical vinyl-sided apartment blocks crowd next to each other in several of the major residential areas. An ostentatious, nearly-finished replica of Istanbul's Blue Mosque stands in the center of town across from the renovated stadium in which Groznyy's Terek football team plays. Side streets, where ordinary neighborhoods with private homes have not fully caught up with Groznyy's reconstruction boom, remained unpaved and rutted.

Georgia Effect?

¶3. (C) Caucasus experts split on the question of whether Russia's recognition of the independence of neighboring Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia will give rise to renewed separatism in Chechnya. Sergey Markedonov, Head of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Moscow, disagreed with the views of Caucasian Knot chief editor Gregoriy Shvedov and Memorial Human Rights Center's Aleksandr Cherkasov that groups in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus might be emboldened to press for their own independence from Moscow. Markedonov told us he believes that the ethnic nationalism popular in the 1990's immediately after the break-up of the Soviet Union has waned -- at least for now -- in the North Caucasus, only to be

replaced in some places by radical Islamism.

Memorial Warns of a Worsening Situation in Chechnya

¶4. (SBU) On September 29 Memorial issued a statement about the worsening situation in Chechnya and Ingushetiya. According to the report, 55 people (including 12 civilians, 17 members of law enforcement and 16 militants) have died in Chechnya this year. So far this year, according to Memorial, 28 people have been kidnapped of whom 15 were later released and one found dead; the remaining 12 are officially missing or still under investigation. The report noted that although the number of disappearances remained on par with last year (which had decreased markedly from 2006), half of the disappearances to date in 2008 occurred in the month of August.

Conspiracies Swirl about Yamadayev's Murder

¶5. (SBU) On September 24, unknown gunmen in Moscow shot and killed Ruslan Yamadayev, a former State Duma member whose family has had a history of run-ins with Kadyrov, the latest of which was an April 4 "road-rage" confrontation on the federal highway in Chechnya that resulted in casualties on both sides. According to the internet-based Caucasian Knot, many residents in Chechnya believe that Yamadayev's execution-style killing will increase the conflict between the two sides. Theories abound in the Moscow press about who may have carried out the murder. The first report of the incident was that the victim was Ruslan's notorious brother Sulim Yamadayev, former commander of the Eastern Brigade who

most recently saw action in Russia's conflict with Georgia over South Ossetia, leading some to think that the killer had made a mistake. Other commentators believed the murder was meant to increase tension in the region by once again pitting the two sides against each other.

¶6. (C) Chechen Ombudsman Nurdy Nukhazhiyev painted Kadyrov as the victim, suggesting that the murder was an attempt by others to discredit the Chechen president. This version was not totally discounted by Moscow experts, including Caucasus watcher Ivan Surkhov, who told us Yamadayev's death was "no gift," potentially setting off a vicious cycle of blood feuds. Sergey Arutyunov, Chairman of the Department of Caucasian Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences thought there was less chance of a blood feud erupting in Chechnya over Yamadayev's death than in neighboring Ingushetiya over the death of opposition leader Magomed Yevloyev while in police custody on August 30. Others speculated that Yamadayev was on his way to or from a meeting at the Kremlin to discuss his future or that of his three brothers. Kadyrov offered his own explanation -- that the murder was rooted in a blood feud by one of the several families whose members the Yamadayev clan had killed in the past. Sulim Yamadayev told reporters his brother was not engaged in any business or the subject of any blood feud for which he could have been targeted, and -- after several tense days -- stated publicly that he did not believe Kadyrov had a hand in his brother's murder.

Comment

¶7. (C) There are still pockets of resistance in Chechnya, especially in the mountainous areas in the south bordering Dagestan that the FSB advised us not to visit. The facade of stability that Kadyrov has erected may face its greatest test if Yamadayev clan loyalists see Ruslan Yamadayev's murder as his work and a Caucasus blood feud ensues.

RUBIN